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ABSTRACT

The transformation of private to public writing not only challenges student writers, but teachers of writing. The most important assessment of writing takes place in the transaction between writer and reader--among peer readers who are actively writing themselves. Faculty should not relinquish responsibility for assessing written products, but a fuller and more sensible assessment of writing must include assessments of how students negotiate meaning. Teachers can achieve assessment through peer tutoring by: (1) asking students to write for themselves only; (2) use peer tutoring to enable students to transform their private writing into public writing; (3) have students negotiate meaning with more specialized communities of discourse; and (4) faculty, then, assess both the writing product and the evidence of transformation. (A brief workshop on peer tutoring as writing assessment and a list of seven sample peer tutoring exercises are attached.) (RS)

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Peer Tutoring and Writing Assessment

One of the most difficult questions asked about faculty-based assessment of writing is simply this: What are we assessing? While mechanics, grammar, and style are significant ways to objectify the assessment of writing, they are, in and of themselves, inadequate.

Students and teachers of writing rightly suspect the subjective aspects of writing assessment. I like to suggest that one of the fundamental and crucial challenges writers face when they begin an assignment--filling the blank page with something, and somehow working to the final stages of the writing we associate with communicating purpose, convincing, and moving an audience--also points to a fundamental and critical element that must be assessed: the transformation of private to public writing.

The transformation of private to public writing not only challenges student writers, but teachers of writing. This is fundamental to what we do when we "teach" writing. Assisting students along the byways of private expression and highways of public discourse is critical to their academic and professional lives. In fact, we know this is true because it is crucial to our academic and professional lives.

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In recent years teachers and theoreticians have sought effective methods to coach the transformation from private writing to public writing and to assess the effectiveness of these methods. But the teacher's role in this transformation is problematic. She can propose rules governing discourse and students can allow these rules to govern their writing, but observers such as C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon point out that too often students find themselves striving to achieve the teacher's version of the "Ideal Text"--not a text they themselves have created by negotiating their private, expressive needs and those of public discourse (120).

Assessment of writing stemming from models of the "Ideal Text" are not based on the acquisition of skills needed to build knowledge, but rules of discourse heaped on students and expectations that students somehow neatly file and categorize them into different writing contexts.

But can we assess students' acquisition of skills needed to build knowledge? Can we assess how well students <u>manage</u> to arrive at effectively written texts? Can we assess the degree to which they <u>believe</u> what they have written?

Peer tutoring can address concerns of teachers about their authority in writing instruction, and students' needs to transform private writing into public writing. Peter Elbow suggests in <u>Writing Without Teachers</u>:

> Writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else's head. If you wish

> to improve your writing, you must learn to do business with other people. That is the goal of the teacherless writing class. (76)

I propose that the most important assessment of writing takes place in the transaction between writer and reader--among peers, readers who are actively writing themselves.

Certainly, faculty should not relinquish responsibility for assessing written products. But I propose that a fuller and more sensible assessment of writing must include assessments of how students negotiate meaning. Assessment must include how skilled students become with the process of building knowledge and how they come to <u>believe</u> what they have written.

How can we achieve assessment through peer tutoring?

1) First, ask students to invent without the intervention of the teacher's authority. Ask them to write for themselves only.

2) Use peer tutoring to enable student writers to begin to transform their private writing into public writing, writing that "gets things inside someone else's head."/1

3) Then ask students to negotiate meaning with more specialized communities of discourse, such as the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, without tossing aside their initial expressive goals.

4) Faculty, then, assess both the writing product and the evidence of transformation: private writing, peer responses, revisions for "publics," what has become

generally known as the student's writing portfolio.

Peer tutoring is an important aspect of writing assessment. Our workshop today will model this.

Workshop: Peer Tutoring as Writing Assessment

1. (5 minutes). Generate a short piece of private writing--writing for yourself--by responding to the following. Use the first-person point of view and simply freewrite.

> Speaking from his "mousehole," Dostoevsky's narrator in Notes From Underground says, "Now, in my case, I'm writing this just for myself. . . . I'll never have any readers" (122).
>
> In his essay "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," Kenneth Bruffee writes, "My ability to write this essay . . . derives from my ability to converse directly with other people in an immediate situation" (641).

Question: Is writing principally private, as Dostoevsky's narrator suggests, or public, as Bruffee suggests? Why? What are your experiences?

2. (10 minutes). Pair yourself with another writer and read your piece to her or him (or swap papers). Then ask your partner at least two of the questions in Elbow and Belanoff's peer response exercises attached. Make notes of the types of exercises you used and your partner's responses immediately below your freewriting.

3. (10 minutes). Consider your original freewriting and your partner's responses. Rewrite your freewriting for a general public by writing a topic sentence and a paragraph in the third-person objective omniscient point of view. Develop your main idea.

4. (10 minutes). Now, below your public paragraph, write again. Assess your private piece, your public paragraph, and your peer's response:

> a) What did you cut, keep, modify, rephrase, etc, and why?
>
> b) Is your revision effective? Which specific changes in (a) above were effective or not effective?
>
> c) Assess your peer's response itself. Identify something about the response that added value to your public paragraph.

## Sample Peer Tutoring Exercises

1. SAYBACK: "Say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my writing."

2. POINTING: Ask readers: "Which words or phrases stick in mind? Which passages or features did you like best? Don't explain why.

3. WHAT'S ALMOST SAID OR IMPLIED: Ask readers: "What's almost said, implied, hovering around the edges? What would you like to hear more about?"

4. CENTER OF GRAVITY: Ask readers: "What do you sense as the source of energy, the focal point, the seedbed, the generative center for this piece?"

5. STRUCTURE; VOICE, POINT OF VIEW, ATTITUDE TOWARD THE READER; LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION OR CONCRETENESS; LANGUAGE, DICTION, SYNTAX: Ask readers to describe each of these features or dimensions of your writing.

6. BELIEVING AND DOUBTING: Ask readers: "Believe (or pretend to believe) everything I have written. Be my ally and tell me what you see. Give me more ideas and perceptions to help my case. Then doubt everything and tell me what you see. What arguments can be made against what I say?"

7. MOVIES OF THE READER'S MIND: Get readers to tell you frankly what happens inside their heads as they read your words.

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Source: Elbow, Peter, and Pat Belanoff. Sharing and Responding. New York: Random, 1989.

## Notes

1/Mara Holt makes a strong case for oral and written peer criticism at different phases of the writing process in "The Value of Written Peer Criticism," College Composition and Communication 43 (1992): 384-92. Holt suggests that informal oral or written responses using methods outlined in Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's Sharing and Responding (New York: Random, 1989) are best used in early drafts, while later drafts benefit from formal written responses, such as Kenneth Bruffee's peer critique sequence described in A Short Course in Writing: A Practical Rhetoric for Teaching Composition Through Collaborative Learning, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, 1985).

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